

Commerce Avenue Fire Hall
201-205 Commerce Avenue
Knoxville
Knox County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-211

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ALL INFORMATION
FOLLOWS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COMMERCE AVENUE FIRE HALL

HABS No. TN-211

Location: 201-205 Commerce Avenue, between State and Gay Streets,
Knoxville, Knox County, Tennessee.

Present Owners: City of Knoxville. Fire Department Business Office, 800
Church Avenue SE, Knoxville, Tennessee.

Present Use: Fire Hall.

Significance: The Commerce Avenue Fire Hall was built in 1904. Its
impressive size and design reflects the pre-occupation of
growing 19th century urban centers with the threat of fire.
Its Renaissance Revival facade is noted for its pressed
metal cornice, dormer, and one-story portico. It is one of
the best extant examples of a large downtown fire hall in
the South.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Begun in the Spring and ended in the Fall of
1904.
2. Architect: Leon Beaver, Knoxville. Beaver practiced in
Knoxville from 1887 to 1904. He came from Dayton, Ohio. He
began a practice as an architect in 1873. From 1887 to 1892 he
was partner with W.C. Hoffmeister of Knoxville. Notable among
their work is the Rose School, Morristown, Tennessee, extant,
and the \$150,000 Hotel Vendome. This now extinct Knoxville
hotel and apartment house was built in 1889 and was six stories
tall. Beaver was noted for his many fine residences and
institutional buildings throughout East Tennessee. He left
Knoxville in 1904 after the death of his father and after
completion of the Commerce Avenue Fire Hall.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

Legal description of the property: a lot measuring 89 feet
on Commerce Avenue and running back 141 feet 8 inches, at
the corner of Commerce and State.

The following title abstract is taken from the records of
the County Registrar, Knox County Courthouse, Knoxville,
Tennessee.

R.S. Payne, Trustee to Grand Opera House Improvement Company
6/27/1895. Book 136, p. 436.

Grand Opera House Improvement Company to Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Knoxville. 7/3/1903. Book 136, p. 436 for \$12,000.

4. Builder, contractor, supplier: The contractors and builders were Gaylon and Borches of Knoxville. The wiring was done by the Knoxville Electric Company. The plumbing and heating were by J.A. Ahler. The storm sewer was designed by Baumann Brothers, architects of Knoxville.
 5. Original plans and construction: The original plans and cost estimate of \$35,000 were presented by Beaver September 4, 1903. On October 19, 1903, the Mayor and Board decided that the building should not cover the entire lot but only 65 feet, leaving a 25 foot lot that could be sold. They felt that stations were also needed in north and east Knoxville and in the 9th Ward. Therefore the board requested Beaver to furnish plans for a building with three entrances, to be 64 feet wide, and to cost less than \$25,000. On March 21, 1904, the Board reversed itself and adopted Beaver's original plan in order to "take proper care of new fire and other improved apparatus ordered by the Board since the great fire on Gay Street." The difference in costs of the two plans was estimated at \$14,568.03. The cost of the plan finally adopted (including the cost of the property and all other costs) was \$40,482.00; the building alone cost \$23,057.42).
 6. Alterations and additions: "Knoxville's first piece of motorized fighting equipment was bought Dec. 2, 1914." * Gradually the use of horses and the need of stables and steam engines were phased out for automotive power and gas driven pumps. Other than the addition of a partition in the right second story locker room in the early 1950s and the present conversion of the second story storage room to a shower and rest room, there have been few interior alterations and only minor ones on the exterior. The old stable is now a recreation room, the old hay loft is a kitchen. The old "Calaboose" in the basement has long since been removed. The basement is now used for parking automobiles. One major interior change is the replacement of the old wood floors with poured concrete in the late 1940s.
- B. Historical Context: Two city anti-fire laws were passed in February, 1822. One of them required each building owner to keep a two-gallon bucket in good repair in the building.

The other law created a fire company, with a captain and four fire masters in command. (Before this there was no officially sanctioned authority for commanding the execution of the fire fighting brigade of sundry citizens).

* No source was included with this quotation. A bibliography on page 5 includes some information which may help identify the source.

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Several more anti-fire ordinances were passed between 1824 and 1850. They controlled the height of chimneys, and limited the use of gunpowder, fireworks, and certain building materials. Old wooden chimneys were replaced with brick and stone.

Knoxville's first Fire Department was organized by the Town Marshall, D.J. Stacks, in 1854. Money was appropriated by the Town Council to "build a Fire Engine," which was done as follows: upon a big wooden box was placed an ordinary pump, propelled by double handles, with four men operating each handle. A long deep trough served as a suction hose with water being poured into this trough from buckets. The water was pumped into the hose comparable in size to our present-day garden hose. This first fire engine was named the "Deluge," with the name being changed to "Pay Lyons" after rebuilding in 1856. The "Niagara" and the "Fountain" followed in that order. All were named by volunteer firemen, with approximately 100 being Negroes under their chief, W.F. Yardly.

The first steam operated Fire Engine for Knoxville was purchased at a cost of \$6,000.00 early in 1867 and bore the name "J.C. Luttrell." The purchase of this first steamer made necessary the hiring of an engineer. Mr. Gideon Johnson was hired at a salary of \$400.00 per year, and became Knoxville's first paid fireman. Knoxville's first Hook and Ladder Truck was a secondhand one, purchased from Nashville in 1869. The second steamer, the "Alex Allison" was purchased in 1877 for \$3,200.

In 1882 the city government assumed direct control of the fire companies in Knoxville. It contracted with M.E. Thompson and Company to build fire houses for the engines and the hook and ladder wagon. One of the first buildings, fronting on State Street, was erected at the northwest corner of State and Commerce (formerly Reservoir) Streets. It was adjacent to the Thompson Livery Stables, where the fire department's horses were kept.

In 1884 city ordinance #503 created Knoxville's first paid fire department. It caused the fire department to move to the city hall from its State Street headquarters. In 1888 the city's first electric fire alarm system was installed. Previously, the alarm consisted only of a tower bell in the city hall which rang out the number of the city ward the fire was in. Volunteers had to find it once they were there. Also in 1888 a second fire station was established in North Knoxville one block west of the present #3 station.

In 1897 a disastrous fire destroyed all the buildings on the east side of Gay Street between Union and Commerce Avenues. The estimated damage was \$1,128,600. Another disastrous fire followed in 1898.

Legislation was subsequently enacted to provide additional appropriations for fire fighting apparatus, facilities, and

personnel. In 1899 the West Knoxville Station was established and a great deal of effort was made to establish a paid Negro company on Reservoir Hill in East Knoxville.

In 1904 the present Commerce Avenue Fire Hall was completed next door to the rented quarters and near the site of the old State Street Station. The cost of the building alone was \$23,057.42. It was designed by Leon Beaver, architect, and built by Gaylon and Borches, general contractors.

"The lot was unattractive and a small pond was on it. Many years ago the lot was used for a freak burial place for a man who had agreed to be hypnotized and placed in a casket to be buried. A place was left open where the curious crowds could visit the grave and look down through the glass cover to view the face of the man who had been buried alive."*

"Uncle' Cas Frassier remembered when he used to fish in the pond. He said the results were discouraging."**

The old city jail or the "Calaboose" as it was called had been under the fire hall on Market Street for many years. The first city calaboose was on Cumberland Street in 1850. The first floor was the jail and the second a private residence. In 1858 the jail was moved to a building on Prince Street. Later, in the 1860s, it was put in the new city hall. This was torn down for the newer city hall in 1888. During the building interval the jail was kept in the rear of the first station on State Street. From 1888-1897 it was kept under the Fire Hall in the City Hall on Market Square. When the new fire hall was built on Commerce Street in 1904, the jail was moved there, but not permanently.

The Commerce Avenue Fire Hall became the home of the city jail, the police department, and the fire department. The jail and police station were downstairs. The stables for the horses were where the pool room is now and the hay was stored at the rear of the second floor.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Renaissance Revival building is of brick bearing wall construction with a brick foundation. It is rectangular in plan, and is three bays wide and six bays long. Layered brick is used in the corner pilasters and front second floor windows for decorative effects. The central entrance portico is interesting for its overall

* No sources were included with the quotations.

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classical character. It has a brick shell with a classical composition on its front face. The composition consists of an entablature, pilasters and columns. The pilasters support the entablature which consists of a wide frieze and a broken pediment with a cartouche. The columns are in the Tuscan mode. The frieze has a panel reading "FIRE DEPARTMENT HEADQUARTERS". The door is set back from the portico line, and has an elliptical transom (now boarded up). The roof is a double hip, with its ridges parallel to the facade. The interior is simple and utilitarian in character. The first floor columns supporting second floor loads are still intact.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Registrars Office, Knox County Courthouse,
Knoxville, Tennessee.

Board Minutes of Mayor, Alderman and Commissioners of the City
of Knoxville, Knoxville City Hall, Tennessee.

"Knoxville's Fire Department" by Capt. Charles C. Adkins, May
1956, Office of the Fire Chief, Safety Building, Knoxville,
Tennessee.

"Commerce Avenue Fire Hall" by William McArthur, McClung
Collection, Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1974.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Souvenir - Knoxville Fire and Police Department, June 1, 1900
Crocket and Conklin, published. McClung Collection, Lawson
McGhee Library, Knoxville, Tennessee.

Knoxville Journal, 10/15/1944, Vertical File, McClung Collection.

Knoxville News Sentinel, 8/8/1961. Lawson McGhee Library,
Knoxville, Tennessee.

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September 1974

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Winter 1986

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1974 recording project was the result of cooperation between the Historic American Buildings Survey, (HABS), Tennessee Historical Commission and East Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, initial research and write up of this report were done by Joseph Herndon, historian.

Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington D.C. office, reviewed the report in the winter of 1986, for transmittal to the Library of Congress. Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer, took the photographs of the fire house in February 1983.

**ADDENDUM TO
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